Remembering a Greater Pacific Hero

By Lt. Gen. Daniel P. Bolger, U.S. Army retired

When the orders came that September morning in 1940, the newly promoted major general could not have been happier. A combat veteran and star of a recent field exercise to evaluate training and logistics, he had served in uniform for more than 30 years. With the world in turmoil for the second time in two decades came the assignment Maj. Gen. Jonathan M. "Skinny" Wainwright had wanted his entire life, the assignment any general wants most: command of a division.

Wainwright, of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, was not taking command of the elite 1st Cav. Instead, he drew an even tougher posting: commanding general of the superb Philippine Division, the most forward-deployed U.S. Army contingent in the western Pacific Ocean. The Philippines were U.S. territory—though they had been promised future independence—and America administered the lands with full responsibility for defense against all enemies. By 1940, the threat was all too obvious. Imperial Japan was on the march across East Asia.

The Philippine Division consisted of the understrength U.S. 31st Infantry Regiment (about 2,000 soldiers) and nearly 8,000 Philippine scouts, carefully recruited, well-trained locals led by American officers and a few well-chosen NCOs. The Philippine Division wore a distinctive patch: a red shield with the gold head of a horned carabao, the notoriously strong and stubborn water buffalo native to the islands. The symbol was well-chosen. Wainwright's division was expected to defend the archipelago with the strength and determination of a stout carabao—or so went conventional military wisdom.

A joint Army-Navy defense plan for possible war with Japan had been established after World War I. Under War Plan Orange, the Philippine Division's mission was to withdraw to the rugged Bataan Peninsula, fronting Manila Bay, and defend the bay "to the last extremity." They expected to be able to hold on for six months while the U.S. gathered strength to reinforce the division and mount a counteroffensive.

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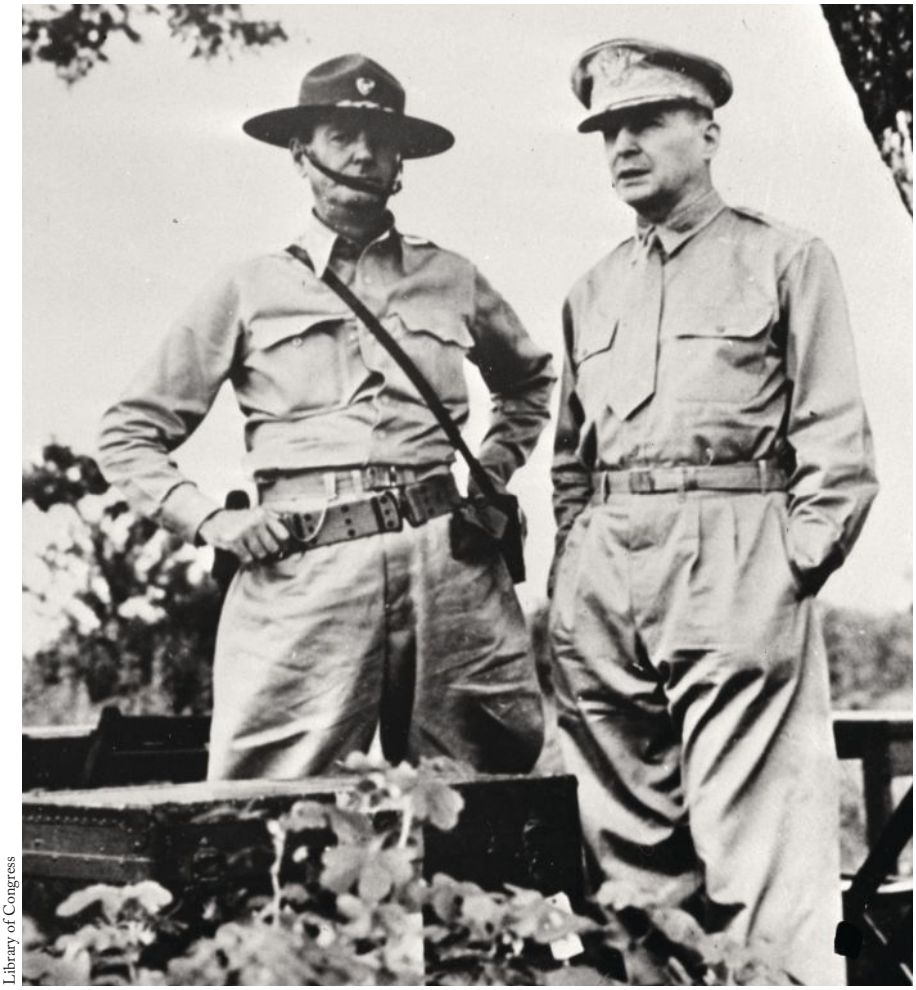
Then-Fort Myer Commandant Jonathan M. Wainwright receives brigadier general stars, 1938.

Wainwright and his Army and Navy counterparts believed there would be some major sea battle offshore to clear the way. Then the U.S. Pacific Fleet would arrive with powerful battleships, aircraft carriers teeming with warplanes, and troop ships full of reinforcements. It was the story line from a Hollywood Western: Hang on to Fort Apache until the cavalry arrives to save the day. Longtime cavalry officer Wainwright knew it well.

As soon as he took command of the Philippine Division, Wainwright was everywhere, pushing himself and his men hard as they trained to do their part. Then their part changed.

By late 1941, the U.S. had brought Gen. Douglas MacArthur back on duty. Wainwright was quite familiar with his new commander. Both men had been first captains—the top cadets in their West Point classes—but while Wainwright had served in the Great War as a dutiful General Staff officer in the 82nd Division (Sgt. Alvin York's outfit, and



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Maj. Gen. Wainwright, left, assumed command of U.S Army Forces in the Far East from Gen. Douglas MacArthur in March 1942.

not yet "Airborne" in 1918), MacArthur had been the dashing *beau sabreur* of World War I's famous 42nd Rainbow Division, leading attacks, patrols and trench raids while sporting a crushed cap and long scarf and armed with a riding crop. After World War I, MacArthur went on to be a reforming superintendent at West Point and Army Chief of Staff before being recalled to active duty.

Brave, brilliant and creative, MacArthur could also be pompous, self-centered and vain. He talked of duty, and performed his far better than most. But too often, he was all about MacArthur. Now that gifted, flawed general commanded Wainwright and the rest of the Americans out on a limb in the Philippines. As usual, MacArthur would do things his way.

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Faced with imminent Japanese invasion, MacArthur dismissed War Plan Orange as "stereotyped" and "defeatist." He chose to go with a bold defense of multiple beaches, relying on newly raised Philippine Army units. MacArthur thought his Army Air Forces bombers and Navy submarines could keep invaders at bay. It briefed well—MacArthur's plans always did. Then reality intervened.

On Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor and invaded the Philippines. Hours after smashing the U.S. Pacific Fleet, waves of Japanese aircraft shredded MacArthur's air wing on the ground and then for an encore, battered and scattered the outmatched U.S. Asiatic Fleet. When tough Japanese riflemen waded ashore, inexperienced Filipino units broke and ran. Stunned by the collapse, MacArthur abandoned Manila to the enemy. MacArthur had no choice but to turn to the only plan everybody knew. So the radio message went out: "WPO [War Plan Orange] is in effect."

The order found Wainwright in command of the North Luzon Force, trying to hold back the Japanese advance. It is said that the most difficult military operation is to withdraw a force under hostile pressure. Hounded by vicious, numerically superior Imperial Japanese regiments, Wainwright pulled it off in the jungles of Luzon in December 1941. He personally engaged in several firefights, directing, urging, inspiring, and consistently setting the example. Led by their general, the bloodied Philippine Division and the rest of the Filipino contingent made it to their final defensive line intact and full of fight.

Wainwright's reward was a green hell called Bataan. His soldiers held but this time, unlike the printed plan or the Saturday afternoon movies, the cavalry never came. The Pacific Fleet lay blackened and wrecked in its base at Pearl Harbor. Wainwright's men were on their own.

Food ran short. Ammunition had to be rationed for cannons and rifles alike. Medicine stocks dwindled. "Skinny" Wainwright became even gaunter. He prowled the front daily, dodging Japanese bullets. Despite the privation, he and his forces kept at it. The defenders suffered from every shortage but courage.

On March 11, 1942, as ordered by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, MacArthur departed with his family and key staff members. In the dead of night, these fortunate few rode torpedo boats and then aircraft toward eventual sanctuary in Australia. Wainwright and his subordinates fought on.

The enraged Japanese finally smashed the bedraggled Americans, forcing a final surrender on May 6, 1942. It fell to

U.S. Army

MacArthur, center, with former prisoners of war Wainwright, right, and British Lt. Gen. Arthur E. Percival in Yokohama, Japan, August 1945

Wainwright to send out the final report as his men burned their colors and spiked their guns. "There is a limit of human endurance," Wainwright told the president, "and that point has long since been passed."

Three and a half years of brutal, grinding captivity followed. Many did not survive barbaric treatment at the hands of the Japanese captors. Maybe the dead had been luckier after all.

In July 1942, when Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall proposed that Wainwright be awarded the Medal of Honor, MacArthur called it a "grave mistake." He wrote to Marshall that awarding this honor to Wainwright "would be a grave injustice to a number of general officers of practically equally responsible positions who not only distinguished themselves by fully as great personal gallantry … but exhibited powers of leadership and inspiration to a degree greatly superior to that of General Wainwright thereby contributing much more to the stability of the command and to the successful conduct of the campaign."

To this day, it's unclear what MacArthur meant by these cutting sentences, which so ill-accorded with the truth. Maybe he didn't see much on his single eight-hour visit to the Bataan Peninsula during the campaign. Fortunately, prisoner of war Wainwright didn't learn of this ungracious missive. For his part, the wise Marshall pocketed the draft citation. There would be time for it later.

Liberating Russian troops found Wainwright in a Manchurian prison camp in August 1945. He emerged bent, gaunt and white-haired. His erstwhile superior MacArthur had risen to become the savior of Australia, the liberator of the Philippine Islands, and the great man of the Pacific War. The midnight departure from the doomed Philippines somehow became part of the heroic MacArthur epic. Indeed, MacArthur received the Medal of Honor for the campaign. Today, MacArthur's name rings from books, documentaries and monuments. Wainwright's is a footnote, if that.

Wainwright had seen his fondest wishes fulfilled. He'd gotten his promotion and his division, and he had commanded his beloved troopers in battle. When others quit—or fled—he held the hard line a long, long way from home. At a time when the Japanese march across the Pacific looked invincible, Wainwright and his people stood. His malaria-ridden soldiers, emaciated Marines, planeless pilots, shipless sailors, valiant nurses and Filipino villagers made a difference. Wainwright didn't order them anywhere. He led them, right to the end.

In the Army, soldiers do not say goodbye but farewell, until we meet again. That may be at the next post, in some desperate battle overseas or, for cavalry troopers, on Fiddler's Green in the great hereafter. MacArthur never expected to see Wainwright again in this life. But on Aug. 31, 1945, a halting ghost appeared in a Yokohama hotel dining room. The victory party subsided, and a great man faced one even greater. MacArthur didn't sleep well that night. By all reports, Wainwright slept just fine. ★

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Wainwright acknowledges a welcoming crowd upon his arrival at New York's La Guardia Field in September 1945.